



Adoption Agency
Adoption Support Agency

Statement of Purpose

October 2017

Approved by: Together for Children Sunderland Board

Date:

If you or someone you know needs help to understand or read this document, please contact us: 0191 561 2221

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This Statement of Purpose gives details of Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Service, what it is and how it works.

The Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service is based in Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland, SR3 4EN.

This Statement of Purpose will provide useful information for children and young people, birth families, and prospective adopters, adopters, Together for Children Sunderland Board, elected members and staff.

2.0 LEGAL CONTEXT

The Statement of Purpose fulfils the requirement of Standard 18 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 (Care Standards Act 2000) and of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005.

The work of adoption services providers in England is governed by the Adoption Agencies Regulations (2005). The Regulations and National Minimum Standards are used in the inspection and registration of Adoption Agencies.

Recent Amendments in the Children and Families Act 2014 update and streamline adoption process and details of this are contained within the statement.

The Statement of Purpose will be submitted for the approval of Together for Children Sunderland Board and shared with Elected Members. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, at least annually, and amended when required.

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Adoption Act 2002 promotes adoption as an option for permanence for Looked After children. The Act places the needs and welfare of the child at the centre of the adoption process and makes the welfare of the child the paramount consideration for a court or adoption agency in all decisions relating to their adoption.

Together for Children Sunderland aims to ensure that all children grow up as part of a loving, caring family who can meet their needs for security, stability and quality care throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Where children are unable, for whatever reason, to live within their own birth family, a range of services and resources will be provided, designed to assist

families in providing care for their children. Where that is not possible, Together for Children Sunderland aims, through its Adoption Service, to find permanent alternative families who will promote the child's wellbeing and development by providing the highest possible standards of care according to his or her individual assessed needs.

3.1 The purpose of the service is to achieve the best possible outcomes for adopted children and their families. We work to ensure that our children are: safe and secure in nurturing and caring homes; they remain healthy; achieve to the best of their abilities and become positive independent adults.

3.2 To achieve the best possible outcomes for children and all of those affected by adoption, the Adoption Service will work to the following objectives:

- To meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated standards, regulations and guidance;
- To ensure that the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process as presented in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption and Children Act 2002: Section 1);
- To promote good practice in adoption and provide good service outcomes to all those involved in the adoption process that are consistent with best practice;
- To contribute to Together for Children Sunderland's work and positive outcomes for children, by making timely decisions about permanence for each child, following a thorough assessment of their needs to which all relevant people have contributed;
- To ensure that effective mechanisms are in place that to ensure timely decision-making processes, which include ensuring that children with an adoption plan are placed without undue delay;
- To ensure that adoption is considered as a positive option for achieving permanence outcomes for children who cannot be cared for within their family of birth;
- To ensure that birth families members are treated fairly, with respect and openness throughout the whole adoption process and that they can access appropriate adoption support services;

- To recruit and maintain sufficient diversity and numbers of prospective and approved adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children who have adoption as their plan. This will include needs arising from race, culture, ethnic origin, religion, language, disability, gender and sexuality;
- To ensure that the adoption preparation process prepares adopters as well as possible for the task of parenting adopted children;
- To provide a child-centred matching, introduction and placement process and to provide safe placements for children that will promote equality and value diversity;
- To provide a point of contact for people living in the Sunderland area and a range of adoption support services aimed at preventing the disruption of adoptive placements and which assist adoptive families, adoptees and birth families with the lifelong impact of adoption;
- To improve performance in adoptions for Looked After Children, including the percentage of children who are adopted from care, to meet national targets;
- To continue to work collaboratively as a member of the North East Adoption Consortium and of the Adoption Match Register, to provide high quality and integrated adoption services;
- To ensure that staff involved in adoption work have appropriate and sufficient skills, knowledge, access to training, experience and appropriate supervision to deliver an effective and efficient service;
- To ensure that applicants for inter-country adoption receive appropriate counselling, advice and information and that such adopters are helped to progress appropriate preparation, assessment and matching services;
- To provide statutory services for children brought into the UK with an intention of adoption and who reside in Sunderland;
- To ensure that adopted people over the age of 18 receive appropriate counselling, advice and information;
- To ensure regular review, monitoring and evaluation of services.

4.0 PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS OF CARE

- Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families are respected and valued;
- Our service is non-discriminatory and anyone seeking to use the Adoption Service is treated with courtesy and respect, and their enquiry dealt with in a timely and sensitive manner;
- Together for Children Sunderland will work in partnership with other local authorities, Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies;
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved. The Adoption Service will work in partnership with other organisations, professionals and individuals to ensure that support services are available as needed to all parties in the adoption process – children, adopters, adopted adults and birth families;
- All parties to the adoption process will have access to the Agency's own complaints procedures and to external complaints mechanisms as set out in legislation, regulations and guidance.

4.1 Children

- Every child is entitled to a permanent family throughout their childhood, which should meet all their needs for stability and security, promote their physical, social and emotional development and which offers a loving and supportive life long relationship;
- Where a child's needs cannot be met within their own birth family, adoption may offer the best alternative;
- Children should only be separated from their siblings where clear evidence supports this and on the completion of a comprehensive assessment based on the children's individual needs;
- Decisions will be taken about children within appropriate timescales, and delay avoided wherever possible, in line with legislation, regulations and standards;
- The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process and their wishes and feelings are actively sought and taken into account, appropriate to their age and understanding;

- Children are treated with respect and their diversity and difference is valued and celebrated. Young people are included in service planning and evaluation
- The views of service users and a range of professionals are taken into account in the development and evaluation of services. We actively promote the opportunity and ability of children to express their views
- Each child will have a named social worker allocated to them who is responsible for them throughout the adoption process
- Each child will be given information about their birth family and life before adoption to promote their sense of identity. This will be provided in an age appropriate format in order to enable the child to access the information at varying times throughout their lives. They will also be given information about their adopters and their families
- Information about birth families will be kept safe by both the relevant agencies and by adopters. This information will be given to adopted children, or adults, at a time and in a way that reflects their age and understanding, as well as the nature of the information
- Contact with birth relatives is encouraged where this is compatible with the child's need for physical safety and emotional security. Training and support will be provided to adopters in order for them to understand the importance of any planned contact arrangements.
- Where appropriate, children are given clear explanations and information about adoption, covering what happens at each stage, and how long each stage is likely to take in their individual case. Information will be provided to the child about to aid them in understanding their adoption journey.
- A sense of identity is vitally important to a child's wellbeing. To help a child develop this, their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language and sexuality need to be recognised and positively valued and promoted. This will be achieved by placing children with adopters who best meet the child's assessed needs.
- A profile will be completed for each child waiting for a placement. The profile will be shared appropriately in order to identify and secure a good match for each child

- Each child will be well prepared before joining a new family and suitable therapy/individual support to address this will be organised for them if required

4.2 Prospective adopters

- Prospective adopters from all backgrounds are welcomed without prejudice and regardless of their ethnic origin, age, disability, background, sexuality, marital or employment status
- Each prospective adopter will be considered on their individual merits and receive a timely response
- Information on becoming an adoptive parent will be provided, including what is expected of adopters. Applicants will be given the opportunity to hear about preparation and support services available to adopters, and to talk to others who have adopted children
- Clear information will be given about children, locally, regionally and nationally who need adoptive families, to help prospective adopters decide whether or not to proceed further. Prospective adopters will also be provided with information regarding accessing First4Adoption in order to give them an independent source of adoption information.
- Clearly written eligibility criteria and details of the assessment and approval process will be provided and clear agreements made about the timescales to completion of each stage of the adoption process
- The assessment and approval process will be comprehensive, thorough and fair. Applicants will be kept fully informed of their progress and of any concerns identified in the assessment. Detailed explanation will be given of the need for statutory checks and enquiries to be made about prospective adopters and members of their household and that certain criminal convictions will exclude applicants
- There will be clear written timescales for each stage. Applicants can expect:
 - ✓ Written information sent in response to their enquiry within 24 hours
 - ✓ Home visit from a social worker following submission of Expression of Interest
 - ✓ Once Expression of Interest has been accepted Stage 1 should be completed within 8 week timescale

- ✓ The Prospective Adopter Report will be completed within 4 months of the end of Stage 1 (unless any specific reason for delay is at the request of the adopters/and where there is a reason due to completion of Stage 1 checks being completed by the Adoption Service)
 - ✓ Applicants will be kept informed of progress throughout. They will receive a copy of the assessment report at least 10 days before an Adoption Panel, have the opportunity to comment on the report and, if they wish, to attend the Adoption Panel and be heard.
 - ✓ Following the Adoption Panel recommendation, a decision on the outcome will be made within six months of the formal application being received.
 - ✓ Normally, provided there are no gaps in the above process, the timescale from application to decision should not be longer than six months, any reasons for delays will be recorded by Panel.
- Foster carers who make a formal application to adopt children in their care will be entitled to the same information and preparation as other adopters, which will form part of a fast track plan to progress through the process without delay. Foster carers will progress immediately to Stage 2 of the adoption process.
 - Prospective adopters will be informed of their rights to make representations and complaint, including access to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). A leaflet giving details about the review process provided by the IRM is made available to all prospective adopters.

4.3 Adoptive parents

- Children will be matched with approved adopters who can offer them a stable and permanent home. Help and support will be provided to achieve a successful and lasting placement
- Approved adopters will be given clear information about the matching, introduction and placement process, as well as any support to facilitate this that they may need. This will include the role of the Adoption Match Register for England and Wales and the North East Adoption Consortium.
- Before a match is agreed, adopters will be given full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child. They will have an opportunity to discuss this information with the child's Social Worker, including the implications for them and their

family and will be offered a meeting with the person responsible for completing the child's adoption health assessment.

- Adopters will be invited to a Child Appreciation Day for each child if that child is looked after by Together for Children Sunderland or looked after by another local authority who conduct such meetings
- There will be access to a range of multi-agency support services before, during and after adoption. Support services will include practical help, professional advice, financial assistance where needed and information about local and national support groups and services
- Adoptive parents will be involved in discussions as to how they can best maintain links, including contact, with birth relatives and significant others identified in the adoption support plan. Adoptive parents will be supported in working with the child's contact plan.
- Adoptive parents will be encouraged to keep safe any information provided by birth families via agencies and to provide this to the adopted child age appropriately from placement onwards. Support to enable adoptive parents to discuss their adoption journey with the child will be available from the adoption service.
- Adoptive parents whose adopted child has decided to explore their birth heritage will be supported to deal with the impact of this decision
- Where there are difficulties with the placement, or the adoption breaks down, the agencies involved will cooperate to provide support and information to the adoptive parents and the child without delay
- Adoptive parents will be informed of their right to make representations and complaints.

4.4 Birth Families

- Wherever possible, the Adoption Service will work in partnership with birth parents and other family members to ensure that effective plans are made and implemented for the child
- Birth families will be treated fairly, openly and with respect, and their relationship with their child will be acknowledged
- Every effort will be made to ensure that birth parents and significant birth family members have a full understanding of the adoption process, the legal implications and their rights. Written information is

available via the child's social worker or the adoption service social worker

- Birth families will be given such information about their child's adoptive parents as is compatible with the child's safety, and that ensures the safety and security of the adoptive family
- Birth parents and birth families (including siblings) will have access to a range of support services both before and after adoption, including information about local and national support groups and services. Independent birth parent support is available via a Service Level Agreement between Together for Children Sunderland and ARC Adoption.
- Birth parents will have the opportunity to give their account of events, and to see and comment on what is written about them in reports for the Adoption Panel (including the Child's Permanence Report) and in information passed to adopters
- Birth parents and families will be supported to provide information that the adopted child needs. This will include information about the adopted child's birth and early life, the birth family's views about adoption and contact and up-to-date information about themselves and their situation. Support will be provided to help birth parents and families understand the importance of their providing information that will benefit the child in the future to know.

5.0 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS

Outlined below are the current arrangements:

5.1 Staffing

Management Structure

A comprehensive adoption service to meet the needs of children, birth families, adoptive parents and adopted adults is planned corporately and provided in collaboration with other relevant agencies.

The Adoption Agency reports to the Together for Children Board.

The Cabinet Member for the Children and Young People's Service is Councillor Louise Farthing.

The Chair of the Together for Children Board is Deborah Jenkins.

The Responsible Individual for the Adoption Service is Debra Patterson.

Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Service plans, commissions and delivers services with local health and education bodies, voluntary adoption agencies, local courts and other relevant agencies, including where applicable other Local Authorities.

Services are compatible with Together for Children's Children in Care Strategy that seeks to improve outcomes of Looked After Children.

There is a range of policies for adoption, including post adoption services. Our all policies and procedures in relation to Adoption have been recently updated and are accessible via Sunderland Procedures Online.

Councillors carry out their responsibilities as corporate parents and will receive regular information on the management and outcomes of the service they are responsible for providing.

Senior managers, report to the Chief Executive Officer of Together for Children Sunderland and ensure that adoption is an integral part of services for children. They are involved in the strategic planning, delivery and monitoring of the adoption service. The agency's performance and key measures will be reported to Directorate Management Team (DMT) every six months.

Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Service is a member of the North East Regional Consortium that provides matches for some children and adopters both within and outside Sunderland.

Adoption Service location:

The Adoption Service is based at:

Sandhill Centre
Grindon Lane
Sunderland
SR3 4EN

5.2 Manager of the Adoption Service and Service Manager

The Registered Manager for the Adoption Agency is Kathryn McCabe.

Registered Manager - Qualification and Experience

The Registered Manager is responsible for overseeing the Adoption Agency. The Registered Manager is based at the Sandhill Centre and has direct operational responsibility for all parts of the adoption service including strategic planning, delivery of the service and performance management via quality assurance systems. The Registered Manager holds Diploma in Social Work and a BA Hons in Applied Social Sciences.

Kathryn McCabe has experience of working within adoption services as a senior practitioner and since 2015 as the Registered Manager for the Adoption Service.

Service Manager - Qualifications and Experience

The Service Manager, Sheila Lough is a qualified social worker. Sheila has worked during her career as a social worker, manager and senior manager. Sheila has an extensive knowledge of both fostering and adoption services.

The Service Manager is responsible for the supervision, appraisal, training and development of the Manager (Adoption Service), Team Manager (Fostering Team), Operations officer (Children's Homes) and the following posts which cover both the Fostering and Adoption Services: Marketing and Recruitment Officer, and the Panel Adviser.

5.3 Agency Decision Maker

The Agency Decision Maker for the service is Debra Patterson.

Debra Patterson is the Director of Social Care for Together for Children Sunderland.

5.4 Adoption Support Services Adviser

The Registered Manager of the Adoption Service (as above) acts as the Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA), delegating tasks as appropriate.

5.5 Staff employed for the purpose of the Adoption Service

Members of the Adoption Service:

Panel Adviser	(0.5 post)
Marketing and Recruitment Officer	(0.5 post)
Adoption Service Manager	(1 post) (F/T)
Assistant Team Managers	(2 posts) (F/T)
Adoption Social Workers	(5 posts)(F/T)
Adoption Social Workers	(2 posts) (.8 post)
Adoption Social Workers	(1 post) (.6 post)
Adoption Support Worker	(1 post) (F/T hours)
Administrator (Letterbox)	(1 post) (2 x .5 posts)
Social Care Assistant	(1 posts) (F/T hours)
Senior Panel Administrator	(1 posts) (.5 post)
Team Administrator	(1 post) (.5 post)

Team administrators and Panel administrators are centrally managed as part of the Together for Children Sunderland business support.

Qualifications: All Adoption Social Workers are professionally qualified (Diploma in Social Work/CQSW), are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and have a minimum of three years' post qualification experience. Some also have a post-qualifying award and/or are trained in Theraplay and in Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DPP).

All Adoption Service staff including the Social Care Assistant are subject to the Together for Children Sunderland's policy on recruitment, staffing, equal opportunities and discipline. All staff, including administration staff and are subject to enhanced DBS checks.

6.0 SERVICES PROVIDED

The Adoption Service provides recruitment, assessment, training and support services for prospective adopters, children adopted, members of the adoptive family, birth families and significant adults

- The Adoption Social Workers' role includes the recruitment, training and assessment, using the CoramBAAF Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). Adoption Social Workers also provide support and supervision for prospective adopters as well as providing support to children and families post adoption
- Adoption Preparation training is delivered by staff from the Adoption Service, supported by professionals from across all disciplines working in the area of looked after children and by external providers
- The Adoption Service ensures approved adopters are informed about children needing placement and support them in identifying suitable matches
- The Social Workers also provide continued support to adopters once they have been approved. They are responsible for overseeing indirect contact between children and birth family members via the Letterbox Service
- They have primary responsibility for family finding for those children for whom adoption is the plan, involving matching of the child's needs with the skills, abilities and preferences of approved adopters
- It is sometimes not appropriate to place a child within the Sunderland area. Where a suitable local match cannot be identified, the team initiate a wider search, with use of regional and national resources such as the North East Consortium, Adoption Match Register, Children who Wait and Opening Minds Events. Opening Minds Events help adopters to be more "open minded" regarding the child they wish to adopt
- Child Appreciation' days are held for all children who are adopted who are usually over the age of 3 years, these meetings enable all professionals and carers of the children to be adopted can meet with the adopters and share all their knowledge of the children. Child Appreciation days can and often are held for children under the age of 3 years however, this is carefully considered prior to being planned
- The Adoption Service has 3 social workers trained in "Theraplay". Theraplay is a method of enhancing attachment, engagement; self esteem and trust in others. It is based on the natural patterns of

healthy interaction between parent and child, is personal, physically engaging and fun. It is a type of parent-child psychotherapy used in a variety of settings. Where it is identified as a need, this kind of support is available to some children placed with adopters

- Prospective adopters participate fully in the placement planning process for each child;
- Where there are any placement disruptions a disruption meeting is held to consider all contributing factors and to plan for the future needs of children, adoptive families and birth families. Clear guidance on the purpose and arranging of this meeting is detailed in the Guidance on Disruption of Adoptive Placements is available.
- Services for birth families are provided by the children and young people locality teams and the Adoption Service and under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with ARC Adoption
- Birth families are provided with post adoption counselling via a Service Level Agreement with ARC Adoption. They are supported with both indirect and direct contact arrangements through the Letterbox Service provided by the Adoption Service
- The Adoption Service encourages all parties to adoption to use the services provided by the Post Adoption Centre (London) www.pac.uk, which offers an information and advice service
- Should any allegations be made about approved adopters they can be provided with independent support, funded by the Together for Children Sunderland.
- Together for Children Sunderland offers out of office emergency social work support to all service user groups

Letterbox Coordinator

The Letterbox Coordinator for letterbox manages the letterbox system and helps birth relatives and adopters to develop a positive exchange of information. This includes sending out reminders to adopters and birth parents that a letterbox exchange is due. The social workers within the service checks all items received and prepare scanned copies of the information to be kept on file.

- Social workers from the Adoption Service are involved in the preparation training of prospective adopters and ensure that they are both aware and conversant with the letterbox system in Sunderland

- Social workers from the Adoption Service provide training and advice to children's social workers in relation to contact planning

6.2 Adoption Panel

Independent Chair of the Adoption Panel

Adoption Panel Adviser: Kathryn McCabe (Post currently out to advert)

Kathryn McCabe is an experienced qualified social worker, who has worked as a social worker in the area of fostering and adoption, and has been the Manager of the Adoption Service since 2015.

Information re: experience and qualifications

All adoption service providers are legally required to have an Adoption Panel. Adoption Panels have an independent role separate from the adoption service provider.

Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service has established two Adoption Panels. The Adoption Panels, Red and Blue meet twice each month. Additional Emergency Panel meetings are arranged where required particularly to avoid any significant delay for a child.

The Adoption Panel works within the same principles and standards of service as the Adoption Agency. Additionally:

- The Panel will take an active role in maintaining the quality of standards of adoption services;
- Involvement of children, families and applicants will be maximised.

The key role of the Adoption Panel is to provide independent scrutiny of the proposals presented and to determine whether:

- All the issues have been clarified
- The proposal is sound

The Panel can then make a recommendation about the following:

- Recommending whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child;
- Recommending the "match" between a child and a particular prospective adopter.

- Adoption Panel is involved in cases where there is no court scrutiny of the adoption plan because birth parents are in agreement with it. In such cases CPR will be presented to the adoption panel for consideration and recommendation.

The Adoption Panel also provides advice regarding:

- The provision of adoption support for particular adoptive families;
- The number of children the prospective adopter may be suitable to adopt, their age range, sex, likely needs and background;
- The arrangements for allowing any person contact with a particular child;
- Whether the parental responsibility of any parent, guardian or the prospective adopter should be restricted for a particular child, and if so, the extent of any such restriction.

Details of the Adoption Panel's membership are available in booklet form. All Panel members are required to sign a Panel Member's Agreement.

The Panel Adviser and the ADM will undertake the annual appraisal of the Panel Chair.

An experienced panel administrator supports the work of the Panel.

See **Appendix 1**

6.3 ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

We understand that placing children in adoptive families is only the beginning. Supporting the placement and recognising the on going needs of the adopted person alongside those of their birth and adoptive families is equally important.

There is a statutory responsibility to provide an Adoption Support plan for every child placed for adoption. The plan must cover the support needs of the child together with those of the adoptive family.

The following information outlines our current arrangements and the services provided.

In Sunderland the responsibility for drawing up the plan lies with the child's social worker with support from the child's adoption social worker. The format used for the assessment and drafting of the support plan is the CoramBAAF document.

This covers the following key areas

- Health
- Education
- Emotional and Behavioural Development
- Identity
- Financial and Resources Support
- Social Presentation
- Self-care skills
- Contact

Services Provided – Post Approval and Post Adoption Support:

The Adoption Service offers a range of post-approval and post adoption support for people who have been adopted, birth families and adopters. We prioritise resources focused on maintaining the relationship between an adoptive child and their adoptive family.

- Adoption support services are provided to adoptive families approved by Together for Children Sunderland before and after placement
- The Adoption Service will liaise with the child's Social Worker to ensure that any additional services required, such as therapeutic support, is identified, assessed and an appropriately qualified provider is identified to deliver the service
- Support services are also provided to adoptive families (including those children within families) living in the Sunderland area that meet the criteria for adoption support services
- Following approval, adopters continue to be supported by their allocated Adoption Social Worker, who assists them in identifying a suitable match with a child/children awaiting adoption
- The Adoption Social Worker remains allocated to the family until an Adoption Order is made and beyond if required
- Prospective adoptive parents and children placed with them are entitled to support from services for Looked After children, whilst the child is placed, prior to an Adoption Order being granted
- The Adoption Service offers a range of training to adopters to increase their knowledge and understanding on subjects including Caring for Children who have been Sexually Abused, Managing Challenging Behaviour, Developing Secure Attachments and Valuing Diversity.

Adoption Preparation training is delivered by staff from the Adoption Service, supported by professionals from across all disciplines working in the area of looked after children and by external providers.

Leaflets advising of the range of services offered are freely available.

- Leaflets advising of the range of services offered are available to adopters and information can be shared and discussed with social workers from the Adoption Service.
- When therapeutic or other adoption support services are identified as needed, and are not available from universal services or services for Looked After Children, spot-purchase funding can be available and funded through the ASF or Together for Children Sunderland.
- Assistance is given to access mainstream education services and to ensure all appropriate arrangements have been made for the child's education, prior to the granting of the Order
- Assistance is also given to support prospective adopters to promote the child's participation in leisure activities and trips;
- Support with the planned future contact arrangements is considered and reviewed as part of the child's Adoption Support Plan
- Adopters can support groups such as "Crafty Kids" a 6 weekly session attended by adopters and children. There is also an adopter led playgroup and a support group that meets bi-monthly for training and discussion. Information about the groups is provided to all adopters.
- Together for Children Sunderland provides adoption allowances, where required, to ensure the adopters can care for the child. The allowance is paid weekly and is needs led, means tested and is subject to annual review or with any changes in circumstances
- Adopters are encouraged to participate in a range of activities that take place for all adopter families during school holidays. This promotes a sense of belonging within the service, and children in care, birth children and adopters all appreciate the opportunity to socialise with each other
- The Adoption Service operates a confidential Letterbox Service, providing safe and proactive contact arrangements for the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families. The adoption service can hold information from birth families and people who have been adopted which can be exchanged with agreement

- Where adopted people, under the age of 18, seek further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service offers counselling and other appropriate services. This is usually in conjunction with the adoptive family
- Where adopted people over the age of 18 ask for further information and possible contact with their birth family, the Adoption Service offers counselling and acts as an intermediary. The Adoption Service strongly supports the National Adoption Contact Register so that all parties to an adoption can record their mutual willingness to be approached. An intermediary service will be available when a link has been made on the register
- Where birth families contact the Adoption Service seeking further information and possible contact, we will act as an intermediary if the whereabouts of the adult who has been adopted are known

7.0 STAFF SUPERVISION, DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

- Our Supervision Policy is in place; members of staff receive regular supervision and annual Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs) to identify professional training and development needs.
- Adoption Panel members have annual appraisals completed by the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser.
- Staff supervision covers professional practice, learning and development, reflection on specific issues and cases, caseload discussion, monitoring of professional service delivery and agreeing actions.
- Regular adoption training is available to, and provided for all staff and Panel members and this can focus on the training needs of an individual or team. Training is arranged with suitable providers and focuses on a variety of topics, including when necessary new legislation or developments within adoption.

During 2016-2017 the following specific learning and development opportunities have been made available to Adoption service staff:

- Dan Hughes (DDP) Level 1 training
- Theraplay
- Early Permanence Planning

Planned specific learning development for Adoption Service staff in 2017 – 2018 will include:

- Effective Chairing for the Independent Panel Chair
- Theraplay Part 2
- Theraplay Group
- Therapeutic Life Story Work

Together for Children Sunderland also subscribes to Coram BAAF an organisation that can provide practice and research literature as well as publicity about children needing adoptive families throughout the UK and training.

8.0 PROCESS FOR RECRUITING, PREPARING, ASSESSING AND APPROVING PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

The following is a summary of the procedure for recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. All timescales comply with the relevant regulations:

8.1 Strategy

- The Adoption Service seeks to recruit a range of adopters from a variety of backgrounds who can address the needs of children requiring placement, including those arising from race, culture, ethnic origin, language, disability, gender and sexuality;
- We aim to target recruitment on those prospective adopters most likely to meet the needs of the children waiting for families. Applications may be prioritised if it is thought applicants could provide a home for a child already waiting to be placed.

8.2 Marketing/Publicity

- Publicity is normally via website, newspaper, social media or radio advertising and also includes use of public information stands. Information about adoption is available in libraries, schools and health centres and can also be downloaded from the Together for Children website. National Adoption Week is promoted each year via website and social media.

8.3 Application process

- Applicants contact the Adoption Service and express an interest in adoption
- A duty Social Worker completes an initial referral and assesses if the applicants meet the eligibility criteria to adopt
- An information pack is sent out to applicants within 24 hours
- The pack contains information about forthcoming information events that are held every month
- To pursue an enquiry, potential adopters are encouraged to attend an information evening

- The information events are an opportunity for potential adopters to access information, talk to members of the Adoption Service and meet approved adopters
- If prospective adopters wish to continue with their interest they are asked to return the Expression of Interest form which will prompt an initial home visit from a member of the Adoption Service
- The visit will discuss adopting a child and to answer any questions which they prospective adopter may have
- Where a couple live in the household both partners should be present. At some point any other children or other adults living in the family home will be seen
- Where the worker considers that the prospective adopter/s have potential they will recommend to the Adoption Service Manager that application be progressed.
- At this stage prospective adopters are asked to complete a registration of interest form
- A social worker from the Adoption Service is then allocated to complete Stage 1 of the assessment process where all necessary statutory checks are undertaken and the applicants have a medical. This stage of the process should be completed within 2 months
- If all checks are returned satisfactorily then applicants are invited to complete an application to adopt and they move into Stage 2 of the assessment process. This stage should be completed within 4 months

8.4 Training

Applicants undertake an initial preparation course and each applicant is required to attend all sessions. The sessions are held during the day over 4 days and 1 evening.

The training sessions aim to:

- Help applicants to make appropriate decisions about their application
- Help applicants to begin preparing evidence in a workbook of their competencies as potential adopters
- Provide the Adoption Service with information about the applicants' understanding and ability to function within a group

The course content is constantly evaluated, improved and updated. Core input as a minimum the topics below will always include:

- The Adoption and Children Act and legal framework for adoption
- Roles and responsibilities of adopters
- The developmental needs of children, the effects of interrupted development and loss and trauma
- The importance of birth families and their life long importance in the adoption process
- Direct and in-direct contact in adoptive placements
- Understanding the effects of child abuse
- Safe caring
- Building Positive Attachments
- Behaviour management and positive parenting
- Disability and equal opportunity issues
- Social media issues in relation to adoption

Applicants' participation is assessed and reported to the assessing social worker. It is also included on the applicants PAR and any concerns are addressed with them.

8.5 Assessment

Each assessment will cover a range of areas including:

- Parenting capacity, awareness and competencies
- Applicants' family, life history, lifestyle and background
- Full statutory checks are completed and obtained, together with financial checks, medical reports and personal references
- A Health and Safety checklist is completed, including transport
- Adult children are contacted and asked to complete a questionnaire about their upbringing and make comments about an applicant's suitability to become an adoptive parent
- Ex partners are contacted (where appropriate) and asked for their views about the proposed application
- Each applicant works closely with the assessing social worker to complete the assessment. The applicant is able to read (excluding references), comment on and address any issues within the report, and to then sign it
- The report is then forwarded to the Adoption Service Manager for checking and signing before being circulated to members of the Adoption Panel

8.6 Adoption Panel – Approval of Adopters

- The completed assessment is presented to the Adoption Panel by the adoption social worker
- Applicants are invited, and encouraged to attend the Panel meeting

- The Panel discusses the content of the assessment and asks any questions it has before reaching a recommendation
- The independent Panel chair will inform the applicant/s of the recommendation/s about suitability to adopt
- The recommendation/s are then considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who makes a final decision on behalf of the agency
- All applicants are notified verbally, and in writing, of the Panel's recommendation/s and of the ADM's decisions
- **Appeal:** Where the decision is that applicants are not considered suitable to adopt a child (a qualifying determination), applicants are informed in writing, giving reasons for the decision

Applicants have 28 working days to decide whether to:

- Accept the decision and withdraw OR
-
- Make representations to the Agency Decision Maker OR
- Apply to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)
- Where applicants make representations to the ADM or the IRM, the final decision will be made by the ADM.
- If applicants are still dissatisfied they may use Together for Children Sunderland complaints system.

9.0 Monitoring and reviewing the service

Various processes are in place to monitor and review the service:

- Children's permanency plans and adoption plans are monitored by the Independent Reviewing Officers, Team Managers, Service Managers and by an audit system
- The Adoption Panel monitors those children who are approved for adoption but are not yet placed within a 6-month period
- After each Panel a questionnaire will be sent to all attendees, seeking their views and feedback. The outcome of these questionnaires will be incorporated into the Panel annual report and discussed at the Annual Business Meeting.
- Each member of the Adoption Panel receives an annual appraisal and the general outcomes of these appraisals are reported back to the Panel
- The quality of reports is monitored by the Adoption Panel and reported to the agency every six months
- The agency's performance, numbers of adopters approved, numbers of children approved and time scales for children's progress through the adoption system is reported to the Senior Management Team every six months, and to the Department for Education annually via the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) Return.
- Statistical information relating to the number, location and type of referrals received via the Communications Team and is analysed and informs our recruitment strategy.
- Preparation and training courses for adopters are regularly evaluated and the activities of the Adoption Panel are evaluated. These evaluations are used to develop the service
- All employee files are audited to ensure compliance and that all relevant checks are up to date
- The Statement of Purpose is reviewed by members of the agency and Together for Children Board

10.0 Complaints and Allegations

Together for Children Sunderland welcomes complaints, comments and suggestions about services from service users, their families, carers or representatives. The complaints procedure recognises the vulnerability of complainants and the need to resolve complaints at the most informal level possible. The adoption service encourages feedback from people (including children) about the service they received. This feedback is then used to inform future service planning and any "lessons learned" are communicated to relevant staff;

- All Looked After children who make a complaint can be provided with the services of an advocate via the IRO service.
- A "Children's Guide to Adoption" ("Your Guide to Adoption") is given to every child placed for adoption (or, dependent on the child's age and level of understanding, to their prospective adopter) and includes the telephone number of the Independent Reviewing Officer and of OFSTED. There are 2 guides available for children, one for children aged 0-11 and one for children aged 11 years and over.
- We encourage adopters to help their adopted children to participate in any consultation opportunities.
- Adopters, prospective adopters and birth families are clearly entitled to use, and are made aware of the complaints procedure if they feel they cannot resolve a difficulty with the individuals concerned or their managers
- Adoption Service staff are knowledgeable about the complaints procedure and comprehensive guidance is available on how to handle complaints.

10.1 The complaints procedure:

- The Complaints procedure has two stages, formal and informal
- Informal complaints are usually dealt with by the Manager of the Service concerned, and as quickly as possible
- If the complaint is serious, or if someone is not satisfied by the action taken by the manager, the complaint can be registered as a formal complaint
- An Investigation Officer, who is not directly involved in providing the service, will be appointed. The complaint will be acknowledged within

seven days and we will respond to the complaint within 28 days. If we are unable to do this we will advise the complainant and agree a timetable for a full response

- If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome, they have 28 days to ask the Complaints Reviewing Officer for the Department's response to be reviewed. An Independent Review Panel will be held within 28 days of that request. The Panel will consist of three people, one of whom will be 'independent' of the Local Authority
- This person will Chair the Panel. The complainant will be sent the recommendations of the Panel within 24 hours of the decision being made. Complainants also have the right to contact their local Councillor or Member of Parliament
- Applicants to become adopters, who are not accepted for approval on the recommendation of the Adoption Panel and/or the decision maker, are able to ask for their case to be reviewed by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Details of this process are made available to applicants during preparation and assessment. Information is available on the IRM from their website www.independentreviewmechanism.org.uk or via email irm@irm.org.uk or by telephone on 0845 450 3956
- The IRM has the following timescales:
 - ✓ Applicants have 40 days from the agency decision to contact the IRM.
 - ✓ The Adoption Agency will be contacted to produce relevant documents within 10 days.
 - ✓ The IRM will set up a panel within 3 months of the application.

10.2 Adoption Panel Complaints and Representations

Any complaint specifically about the Adoption panel should be directed to the Panel Adviser or Chair in the first instance, to assist resolution. If the matter cannot be resolved at stage one then the usual complaints procedure for Together for Children Sunderland will be used.

In the event that someone wishes to make a complaint they may contact:

Tel: 0191 561 7997

Email: complaints.children@sunderland.gov.uk

Alternatively they may wish to contact the Adoption Inspection Team at:

OFSTED,
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

10.3 Allegations

Any complaint, allegation or concern about a child involving possible injury or harm to a child, including historical complaints, will be investigated within the existing Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board Procedures.

10.4 Adoption Outcomes

Adoption outcomes are given as reporting years 2015 to 2016 and a breakdown of outcomes April 2016 to March 2017.

	2015 -16	2016-17
Children placed for adoption	35	46
Number of adopters approved	21	21
Sibling groups placed	3	10
Number of adoption disruptions	1	2
Children with adoption orders	29	47

ANNEX 1

Membership of Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Panel

Central list

Panel members are drawn from a list of people whom it is considered have the appropriate qualifications and/or experiences to consider cases submitted to the Adoption Panel.

There is no limit to the number of people who are on the central list and the same people do not have to be appointed to every Panel.

Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service will decide how many Panel members should sit on each Panel meeting, subject to the Panel meeting being "quorate" (a certain number of people need to be present for the meeting to go ahead). Panel business can only be conducted if there are at least 5 members present, including the Chair or Vice Chair and the adoption social worker. Where the Vice Chair has to chair the meeting and is not an independent, at least one independent member must be present for the Panel to be quorate.

The Panel should not be so large so that it is difficult to chair and could be seen as rather overwhelming to prospective adopters attending the meeting.

The central list in Sunderland includes:

- A Chairperson – an independent person with the necessary skills and experience.
- Social workers, each with at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience in child care social work, including direct experience in adoption work. The social workers do not need to be employed by the agency.
- One elected member of Sunderland City Council, preferably with experience of Child Care Services.
- The Medical Adviser – will have expertise in child health and health related issues.

- Other persons – “independent members”, including where practicable at least two persons with personal experience of adoption. This could include specialists in education, child and adolescent mental health, race and culture and those who have personal experience of adoption.
- Additionally, a Legal Adviser to the Panel will be identified, who may or may not be a Panel member. The Legal Adviser will be a qualified solicitor who is well experienced in child and family law and is also a member of the Law Society’s Children’s Panel.

Agency Adviser to the Adoption Panel

The Agency Adviser to the Adoption Panel is a senior member of staff with at least five years’ relevant post-qualifying experience and relevant management experience.

The Agency Adviser is not a Panel member but should attend Panel meetings. Where necessary another Agency Adviser will deputise.

Vice Chair of the Panel

One member of the Panel will be appointed as Vice Chair, with responsibility for acting as the Panel Chair if the Chairperson is absent or the appointment is vacant. A second Vice Chair may also be appointed.

Annex 2

Glossary

Please see below explanation of some of the abbreviations and terms used in the Together for Children Sunderland Adoption Statement of Purpose

ADM This means the Agency Decision Maker, who makes decisions about adoption following recommendations by the Adoption Panel.

Adoption Match for England and Wales

This is a national register that works with adoption agencies to match children with families. If a local authority cannot find a match locally then the Adoption Match may be able to help.

Adoption UK **Adoption UK** is a national charity run by and for adopters, which provides self-help information, advice, support and training on all areas of adoption and adoptive parenting.

Coram BAAF **Coram BAAF** is a national organisation that works with everyone involved with adoption and fostering in the UK.

IRM This is the Independent Review Mechanism that applies if a prospective adopter wants to ask for an independent review of a decision made by an adoption agency about their approval.

ARC Adoption **ARC Adoption** provides a range of adoption support to Together for Children Sunderland's Adoption Service under a Service Level Agreement. Services included are independent birth parent support and adoptive parents buddying system.

Annex 3 Structure Chart

